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"The higher the tower, the greater the fall thereof." It is a fundamental trait of human nature to be fascinated by the downfall of others. When it comes to those who dwell in the proverbial limelight, this interest is magnified tenfold. Gossip magazines recount the lurid details of the latest celebrity divorce, journalists dissect the private affairs of politicians, we devour sins and scandals of the beau monde. And as Horace observed, the higher the pedestal, the more sensational and engrossing we find the disgrace. For this reason, both the Queen Caroline Affair and the Diamond Necklace Affair were destined to be scandals of colossal proportions: they involved two of the highest-ranking women of the time. However, they share several key characteristics other than their magnitude. Both trials were used as a medium through which to express existent frustrations with the government as well as fears about sexuality and outrage at its potential danger to society. However, they varied widely with regard to the actual targets of political frustration, the nature of the danger sexuality posed, and the subject of whom the public found to be at fault.

In the spring of 1820, Caroline of Brunswick, the estranged wife of George IV of England, arrived in London to claim her right to coronation following her husband's ascension to the throne. The king despised his wife, who had lived abroad for the past six years and reportedly engaged in numerous extramarital affairs, not unlike George himself. Determined to rid himself of loathsome marriage, he commanded his ministers to introduce a bill to Parliament in order to obtain a divorce. Caroline quickly became a sympathetic figure to the British populace, who hated the king's widely publicized, licentious behavior. Largely as a result of the queen's sudden popularity, the government was forced to recall the bill.[1]

After falling from the favor of Queen Marie Antoinette in 18th century France, Cardinal Rohan, a prominent nobleman at Versailles, was desperate to regain position. The wily Countess of La Motte promised to aid him in this endeavor, claiming she was a member of the queen's innermost circle. She arranged a nighttime meeting between the Cardinal and a prostitute, disguised to resemble Marie Antoinette. After this deception, La Motte persuaded Rohan that the only sure path to the queen's favor was to purchase her an absurdly extravagant diamond necklace designed by the Crown jewelers. Eager to solidify his station, the Cardinal bought the necklace and gave it to La Motte who assured him she would give to Marie on his behalf and then promptly disappeared, luxurious bauble in hand. When the jeweler did not receive full payment for the necklace, Rohan was arrested and the scheme was revealed, prompting a public scandal that permanently blemished the queen's reputation, despite her innocence.[2]

[1] Tamara L. Hunt, "Morality and Monarchy in the Queen Caroline Affair." *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, no. 4 (1991): 697.
[2] Sarah Maza, "The Diamond Necklace Affair Revisited (1785—1786): The Case of the Missing Queen," in *Marie-Antoinette: Writings on the Body of a Queen*, edited by Dena Goodman and Thomas E. Kaiser (Routledge, 2003), 73-98.

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On the surface, the attention garnered by both scandals appears relatively self-explanatory: one trial involved a grand jewelry heist, the other a scandalous divorce. When one looks deeper however, it becomes apparent that these trials gave the public a critical vehicle through which to vent their dissatisfaction with the current regime. In the Queen Caroline Affair, many attacked the government's actions as unconstitutional, a dangerous precedent that reflected the corruption of both the king and his ministers. Prime Minister Liverpool chose to use a Bill of Pains and Penalties rather than standard divorce proceedings, which would have effectively dissolve the marriage while ensuring that the queen would have no opportunity to make her own counter-charges. The Bill and extreme secrecy shrouding the minister's preparation for its debate in Parliament was widely viewed "as the machinations of tyrants and thus a threat to the rights of all Englishmen."[3] Popular political cartoons such as "A Peep into the Green Bag" illustrate the collective belief that "the government was committed to lie through thick and thin," portraying the king as devious and unethical, and the witnesses called to court as nefarious ragamuffins hired to "swear to any lie."[4] This reflects the widespread perception of both Parliament and George IV as corrupt, together an immoral aristocratic ensemble who used its ill-gotten power for its own means. Indeed, much of Caroline's support seemed to stem from the sole fact that she could be used as a method to criticize the king; as soon as the Bill was withdrawn, her popularity plummeted.

Similarly, the Diamond Necklace Affair exposed the public's unfavorable view of Marie Antoinette and women in the political sphere. Intense dissatisfaction with the government because of the political influence of women was rampant. The trial acquitted Cardinal Rohan of mistaking two disreputable women, one a con artist, the other a prostitute, with the Queen. The

[3] Hunt, 703.
[4] Hunt, 704.

public's acceptance of so drastic a mix-up reveals subliminal association of women in the political sphere with such deviance, exposing a long-running frustration with the way women at Versailles seemed to dominate and manipulate men. This began with Louis XV's servile deference to his much-loathed mistresses. There had long been "feeling by many a subject…that the kingdom was governed by 'whores'," and there was a strong undercurrent of distrust and abhorrence for powerful women at court clearly displayed by the trial's outcome.[5] Hatred for the seemingly female usurpation of political influence extended into a deep animosity for the government as a whole. In addition, as the widely publicized legal briefs of Rohan's attorney pointed out, the underhanded acquisition of an absurdly expensive bauble was not something uncharacteristic of the frivolous queen, reflecting widespread dislike of "Madame Déficit" and resentment of the opulent Court of Versailles as a whole.[6] With a large percentage of the French population near starving at the time, such alleged extravagance provoked passionate hatred for the monarchy.

Both trials also demonstrate the fear surrounding sexuality at the time and its consequent damage to the social order. In the case of Queen Caroline, her husband's innumerable affairs were seen as malevolent depravity: they had caused Caroline's exile from England and abandonment of her daughter. In the public's mind, George's indecent sexual activities forced a woman to abandon her God-ordained roles as wife and mother, making Caroline a sympathetic and pitiable figure and George a villain. The idea of sexuality as damaging when outside its proper Victorian sphere was apparent throughout the trial. The ubiquity of unflattering caricatures featuring the king cavorting lewdly with his mistresses and the public image of the

[5] Maza, 66.
[6] Maza, 63.

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queen as "a wife driven from home" reveals society's fear of the potential destruction uninhibited sexuality wrecks on the structure of society, especially the home.[7]

The Diamond Necklace Affair also featured fears about sexuality. Cardinal Rohan bought the necklace in an attempt to gain favor with Marie Antoinette, who held power over the king by nature of their sexual relationship. Nicole Leguay, who successfully masqueraded as the queen, was a prostitute, drawing an obvious unflattering connection to Marie Antoinette in the public's mind. In addition, the necklace 'the queen' sought had originally been designed for Madame Du Barry, the most reviled of all Louis XV's mistresses. "One of the most popular pamphlets of the 1780s included a lengthy parallel between Du Barry and the queen," demonstrating how the link between these women, their sexuality, and the danger they posed to the social order preyed on the mind of the French public.[8] This 'danger' was apparent in the court politics of the time. For years at Versailles, the way to gain favor with the king was by ingratiating oneself with his mistresses or wife. This gave such women power through their sexuality; Louis XV's ministers Maupeou, Terray and d'Aiguillon all groveled at the feet of Du Barry in order to gain status, Cardinal Rohan's motivation in buying the necklace for Marie Antoinette was in hopes of obtaining political power. "Female sexuality, it seemed [to the public], had taken over the sacred center of the kingdom."[9] The rise of such female power through sexuality upset the traditional structure of the patriarchy and terrified the French public. The unfortunate association with Du Barry and Leguay, as well as much-circulated pamphlets alleging her sexual escapades, effectively transferred the long-running hatred of women in the public sphere to Marie Antoinette. The monarchy was viewed as 'contaminated' because of its necessary inclusion of

[7] Maza, 711.
[8] Maza, 69.
[9] Maza, 68.

such women and their potential to damage social order. Consequently, many believed the solution was an all-male representative body, where women and their sexuality could in no way harm the accepted structure of society.

While both of these trials did efficiently serve as tools to criticize perceived government faults, the extent of this anger in relation to the respective regimes differed sharply. In the Queen Caroline Affair, the public saw an institution flawed by a corrupt set of politicians, the majority of whom acquired their positions through gerrymandering or aristocratic prestige. For many, the trial was clear-cut proof that the king and his ministers were bastardizing political power for their own benefit, "a course of action that reflected the tyrannical aims of the Ministry."[10] The public "linked the queen's cause with ongoing political agitation" to reform the way Parliament members were elected, as well as the scope of the King's power.[11] This agitation would eventually result in the extent of the vote to middle-class men, rather than just the landed gentry. In other words, the source of popular frustration in the Queen Caroline Affair was not the government as a holistic entity, but rather the handful of men who currently ruled it. Contrastingly, in the Diamond Necklace Affair, the governmental system overall was the cause of public anger. Women who had sexual relationships with powerful men, such as royal mistresses or the queen, held important positions of political sway. For the French, "the overlapping of female sexual and political activity had become a central metaphor for political decay" and the longstanding involvement of female sexuality in politics became a central factor in the push for complete government revision.[12] Unlike in the Queen Caroline Affair, it was the

[10] Hunt, 702.
[11] Hunt, 703.
[12] Maza, 76.

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entire system of government that was seen as defective, rather than just a few prominent politicians. This view would set the stage for the French Revolution.

While both trials illustrate concern over the perils of sexuality, the nature of these supposed dangers differ noticeably. In the Queen Caroline Affair, sexuality posed a threat to domestic life. The vilification of George IV for his infidelity translated directly to the public persona of Caroline as an abused wife and wronged mother, an "ill-used woman…whose only child was torn from [her]".[13] This image appeared in countless popular political cartoons of the time, underlining the prevalence of the belief. Sexual deviancy violated the home and destroyed the nuclear family, resulting in moral degradation and social instability. In the Diamond Necklace Affair, sexuality harmed public life. Women had gained positions of political influence by means of their sensuality, rendering the regime fractured and corrupt by nature of their authority. "Female sexuality was seen as the breach through which chaos had overtaken the realm," the cause of monarchical deterioration and the contamination of the political sphere.[14] With the rise of women, the solidity of patriarchal monarchy fell. Unlike in the Queen Caroline Affair, sexuality had overtaken and polluted the public sphere rather than the private one.

In the court of public opinion, the outcomes of these two trials varied immensely. While Caroline was overwhelmingly supported, although in reality guilty, Marie Antoinette was universally damned, even though completely innocent. This is due not because of the facts of the cases; in many ways, the facts seemed to be completely irrelevant to the public. Instead, it was the surrounding perceptions and concerns with the government, sexuality, and society that determined the verdict. Caroline was a symbol of what the British people were intensely worried about: destruction of the family and breakdown of the social order amid new forces of

[13] Hunt, 714.
[14] Maza, 78.

industrialization and urbanization, as well as widespread dissatisfaction with a corrupt government. Consequently, the public was overwhelmingly supportive of her. Marie Antoinette on the other hand, was a representation of what the public hated most, a woman powerful because of her sexuality, who had prodigious authority over men at court, and who lived an extravagant, frivolous life. Therefore, society as a whole united in loathing the ill-fated queen. The Queen Caroline Affair had a separate, distinct villain, the lecherous King George IV, "a husband well-known for his infidelities" who posed a clear danger to the conventional English family and accepted sense of morality.[15] The Diamond Necklace Affair on the other hand, had two main villainesses, both of whom bore close resemblance to the queen. "By linking the queen's name to those two adventuresses whose careers closely that of Madame Du Barry, the Diamond Necklace Affair greatly facilitated the transition from attacks on the former reign to slanders of the reigning queen."[16] Thus, the Affair heavily contributed to the massive unpopularity of Marie Antoinette and the French monarchy.

Reflections of social turmoil, gender roles, and government criticism can be found in both the Queen Caroline Affair and that of the Diamond Necklace, offering key insight into each culture at the time. While the details of these two scandals differ, both serve as unique snapshots of the concerns and fears of the public. In a way, all scandals are simply a reflection of us: our prejudices, our judgments, our sense of morality. Whether we condemn a politician for a discovered vice or shame an athlete accused of enhancing his performance, scandals give us a platform to speak from, a stage to perform on, a mask behind which we can freely judge. If Oscar Wilde was correct, we are never more honest than when we adopt a façade, never more

[15] Hunt, 711.
[16] Maza, 70.

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truthful than when wearing a disguise. Scandals give us the opportunity to reveal our fears, preconceptions, and trepidations, while offering a piercing, authentic look at society.

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